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Venäläinen, Satu

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A poem about studying women as perpetrators of violence that is not

Satu Venäläinen

Keywords

Emotions, methodology, poetic writing, qualitative research, violence

The following poem aims to crystallize some of the core dilemmas and affects that I have encountered in my research on the challenging and complex topic of women as perpetrators of violence. It engages, in particular, with: the topic of emotions in research (e.g. Dickson-Swift, et al., 2009), relations between research topics, theories and methodologies, and the possibilities for fluidity in these relations (see e.g. Childers, 2014), and the dilemmas in researching groups designated as ‘other’ in wide-ranging socio-cultural practices (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). Through the engagements with these issues, the poem also attunes to ambivalent relations between different research paradigms and their epistemological and ontological background assumptions. This attunement takes inspiration from so called post-qualitative approaches (St. Pierre, 2011) that are based on questioning the assumptions at the very core of conventional research practices in qualitative inquiry and hence on troubling their taken-for-grantedness. The use of art forms such as poetic writing allows for practicing research in ways that question conventional methodologies by pointing towards a plurality of meanings that exceed simplistic or reductionist interpretations (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). It can therefore enhance reflexivity and ethicality in research by laying emphasis on the existence of alternatives in terms of approaches adopted and interpretations made. In line with these thoughts, the poem below aims to

engage with the tension between different approaches and in relations between approaches and research areas, without attempting to dissolve it. In order to ensure anonymity, the descriptions of research encounters in the poem are purposefully vague, and not based on any singular encounters but amalgams of various ones.

Where, when and how

would it become possible

to study women as perpetrators of violence?

to hear from imprisoned women

the versions of events that brought them there

– Certainly not *here*,

many say

that's not what we study here

nor should it be studied *there* either.

– They're worse than men, you know,

'cause they try to trick you. They're dishonest,

said someone else, with authority of experience.

deceitful! that's what the tabloids say too.

you'd better watch your back.

where is that atmosphere

of mistrust

as I came to characterize relations within prison?

where is my evidence for making such a claim?

in the flicker in the guard's eyes,

in the rattle of keys opening cell doors

in the coldness of the surface of the table under my scribbling pen

in the arrangement of the furniture

that separate me from *them*

and allow for *my* escape if things went awry

in the reticence of the women I interviewed?

where will this atmosphere be (re)presented,

in the pages of my manuscripts?

did I flinch,

did the micro-muscles of my face tighten

as she told about how she stabbed him until life ran out of him?

what are you supposed to say to that?

supposed to stay neutral?

(and whose side are you on, anyway? the victim's, or *theirs*?)

are there any sides?

or just various layers of Suffering, suffering, suffering)

where is my researcher's objectivity and distance?

I could use them now,

even though I stopped believing in their unadulterated attainability a while ago.

did the notions about lost cases

get under my skin as well?

what did the women I interviewed see in my eyes

– heartbreak, despair, hope?

when they told about their desires for a better future

– What do I dream about? Just a normal life, ya know, 'cause I never had one

said many of them, and I wanted to believe

how can I tell their stories?

and what kind of stories are they?

stories about accumulated victimhood

generational transfer of violence

of violence as a source of worth

stories about negotiating the stigma of violence

which story? for there are so many

whose story

(can it be, if we no longer believe in the possibility of giving voice?)

and for whom, and where and when, to tell

so as not to play into the hands of those seeking for evidence (again with evidence)

of the severity of female maladies

of feminists' alleged misgivings about the gender of violence

so as to make good

(– and what might that be here?)

what if we assumed no foundations?

no foundations that told us how things really *are*

and how it is best to proceed

under *all* circumstances

no truths, no *wheres*, no *whens*, no *hows*,

what can we *know*, then? what can we *do*? what will *follow*?

postmodern bliss or doom?

freedom from the power of signs and conventions?

loss of sanity along with the norms that govern it?

or something in between, both, neither and something more?

(or what if those foundations were soft, permeable and in flux all along)

– Impossible! You cannot talk about violence, or those who commit it,

without certainty;

you might end up justifying it

you might end up obscuring the materiality of suffering it induces

you might end up not saying anything at all about it

and so much should be said about it.

– but what if? what if?

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